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Portraiture of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism: colonial transformation and the social role[1]

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ABSTRACT

Today, single portraits representing Guru Nanak are very popular among the Sikhs and are frequently hung on the walls of houses and temples. It is during the Singh Sabha Movement from the 1870s that portraits of Guru Nanak came to be hung on the walls of Sikhs' temple and house by the urban middle class. Wall-hung portraits of Guru Nanak symbolises the uniqueness of Sikhism and, since they were painted both in a unique three-quarter face and in a Hindu-like frontal, Guru Nanak portraiture has played a pivotal role in social cohesion among the Sikhs who belonged to different factions.

KEYWORDS

Sikh art; portraiture; colonialism; Punjab; material religion

Introduction

Today, portraits of Guru Nanak[2] (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism, are very popular among the Sikhs[3] and can be found on the walls of Sikh temples, houses and stores[4] (see Photos 1 and 2). However, since the historical gurus of Sikhism criticised those who conducted idolatry, some say that Sikhism prohibits idolatry. So, why were portraits of Guru Nanak hung on walls in contemporary Sikh society[5]? To explore the reasons, this paper aims to identify the origin of the custom of hanging portraits on walls and claims that it is rooted in the British colonial period. Also, I argue that these wall-hung portraits expressed the uniqueness and variety of the Sikh identity and played the role of socially integrating the Sikhs who belonged to different factions.

To begin, let us oversee the artistic milieu of the Punjab[6] region where Sikh art flourished. In the Punjab region before the nineteenth century, miniatures known as the Pahari School were produced in the Rajput kingdoms of the hills. Some Pahari painters worked for the Sikh chiefs who went on conquests in the hills, and depicted paintings of Sikhism and the Sikhs (Goswamy 1999). In the Sikh Kingdom of the early nineteenth century, many local artists were active in addition to painters from the hills. For example, the painters of a workshop, in which Imam Bakhsh was the master, were famous for portraying British and French generals who served in the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839).[7] Meanwhile, many professional and amateur painters from Europe throughout the nineteenth century visited Punjab and recorded the lives of local people for ethnographic purposes (Aijazuddin 1979; 1999). Although their works

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Photo 1. Guru Nanak Darbar. Rajpura, Panjab, India.

Photo 2. Receptionist at a Hotel in Punjab, India.

were created from an Orientalist viewpoint, some postcards revealed families and friends of the homeland the Indian image as it was (Stevenson 2013).

In the late nineteenth century, European influence on the art of the Punjab region became more direct and obvious, exemplified by the establishment of the Mayo School of Arts in 1875. The Mayo School of Arts was the fourth Western art school in the subcontinent, following Calcutta in 1839, Madras in 1850 and Bombay in 1851 (Guha-Thakurta 1992, 60; Mitter 1994, 29–62). The school was established based on the report of Baden Powell (1857–1941), who complained about the poor artistic

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milieu of that time and aimed to promote industrial art using art education known as the South Kensington style. While local craftsman castes who traditionally engaged in the production of art were rejected due to their conservative attitudes, the teachers struggled with the poor English ability of the lower castes. Since the British teachers did not approve of the artistic value of local products and regarded them as no more than artifacts, the students were primarily expected to receive training on line drawing[8] (Tarar 2003, 23–24; 2011).

Despite the regional importance of the Punjab region, with its diverse culture, previous scholarship on South Asian art did not pay much attention to the colonial art of Punjab, except the studies of Abdul Rahman Chughtai (1894–1975), a national artist of Pakistan (Guha-Thakurta 1992; Dadi 2010). We can presume two reasons. First, the Punjab region, which was the last conquered region in Pan-India, came to be controlled by the East India Company in 1849. Therefore, it is pointed out that the number of artworks produced for British patrons was minuscule. Second, researchers have mainly focused on artistic activities developed under the auspice of royalty and nobility. Although this suited all the regions under British control, the majority of local royalty and nobility, who were patrons of art before the colonial period, collapsed during the colonial period. As a result, local creative activities have been overlooked.

Considering the above, this paper draws attention to the patronage of the newly formed urban middle class in colonial Punjab. Local patrons in colonial Punjab had been veiled for a long time. The British colonial administration formed a middle class across religions and ethnicities in the Punjab region (Oberoi 1994, 260–262; Sohal 2008). The majority engaged in jobs newly formed by the introduction of a capitalist-dominated economy[9], which employed local painters and commissioned the production of artworks representing traditional themes. Among the colonial art of the Punjab region produced in those social circumstances, this research focuses on Sikh art.[10] This is because portraitures of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, started to be hung on walls during this period, which is considered to play a new social role as an actor constituting society.[11] Since the newly formed urban middle class positively accepted Western culture, the custom of hanging painting on a wall is believed to have been adopted as part of Western culture.[12] It is significant that the Lahore Museum was founded in 1865 and brought together the urban middle class from throughout Punjab, where the traditional paintings known as miniatures were displayed on the walls.

The organisation of this paper is described below. *Descriptions of Idolatry in the Sikh Scripture* extracts statements on idolatry from the Guru Granth Sahib, a sacred Sikh text, and demonstrates how idolatry was criticised in Sikhism. This is because the items prohibited as idolatry were regarded as stone statues, which allowed artists to paint on paper or canvas Sikhism's founder. *Iconography of Guru Nanak in Narrative Painting* and *Portraiture of Guru Nanak Before the Colonial Period* examines how Guru Nanak was depicted. Exemplified by the narrative paintings of the Janam-sakhis, the hagiography of Guru Nanak, the portraits of Guru Nanak produced in the Punjab region and others in the subcontinent between the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, these chapters explore their iconographic and formal features.[13] In the subsequent chapter, *Local Communities Against Colonial Rule*, I outline the British colonial administration from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth

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century and its implications for local communities. I also examine the background of the emergence of the wall-hung portraiture of Guru Nanak. *Colonial Portraiture of Guru Nanak* focuses on portraits produced from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. This chapter analyses the formal features of the icon and considers their way of appreciation and their patrons. *The Social Role of Guru Nanak Portraiture* examines the significance of the emergence of wall-hung portraiture of Guru Nanak, focuses on the use of both a frontal and three-quarter face in the portraits and argues that portraiture of Guru Nanak played the role of socially integrating the Sikhs who belonged to different factions.

Descriptions of Idolatry in Sikh Scripture

Although the purpose of this paper is to explore how portraiture of Guru Nanak came to be hung on walls during the colonial period, how is this phenomenon associated with Sikh doctrine that prohibits idolatry? The Guru Granth Sahib is known as the second edition of the Adi Granth that the fifth Guru Arjan (1563–1606) compiled (Kapoor 2003, 139). The Guru Granth Sahib was presumably completed when the tenth Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708) added his own verses and the ones of the ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur, his father. The major characteristics of the sacred text are to be inserted into the verses of Hindu ascetics such as Kabir (1398–1448), Muslim Sufis and the Sikh Gurus. When Guru Gobind Singh passed away in 1708, he abolished the human Guru that was easily targeted by the Mughal Empire. As a result, the Guru Granth Sahib is installed instead of ten human Gurus in the Darbar Sahib, the contemporary Sikh headquarters. Since the sacred text includes about twenty descriptions of idolatry, I will address four of them here. (The page number of the English translation matches that of the original text.)

> The Hindus have forgotten the Primal Lord; they are going the wrong way. As Naarad instructed them, they are worshipping idols. They are blind and mute, the blindest of the blind. The ignorant fools pick up stones and worship them. But when those stones themselves sink, who will carry you across? (Khalsa 2018, 556)

> With the home of his own self, he does not even come to see his Lord and Master. And yet, around his neck, he hangs a stone god. The faithless cynic wanders around, deluded by doubt. He churns water, and after wasting his life away, he dies. That stone, which he calls his god, that stone pulls him down and drowns him. O sinner, you are untrue to your own self; a boat of stone will not carry you across. Meeting the Guru, O Nanak, I know my Lord and Master. The Perfect Architect of Destiny is pervading and permeating the water, the land and the sky (Khalsa 2018, 739).

> Their service is useless. Those who fall at the feet of a stone god their work is wasted in vain. My Lord and Master speaks forever. God gives His gifts to all living beings. The Divine Lord is within the self, but the spiritually blind one does not know this. Deluded by doubt, he is caught in the noose. The stone does not speak; it does not give anything to anyone. Such religious rituals are useless; such service is fruitless (Khalsa 2018, 1160).

> In your home is the Lord God, along with all your other gods. You wash your stone gods and worship them. You offer saffron, sandalwood and flowers. Falling at their feet, you try so hard to appease them. Begging, begging from other people, you get things to wear and eat. For your blind deeds, you will be blindly punished (Khalsa 2018, 1240).

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The above descriptions mention the uselessness of Hindu's idol worship and resultantly demonstrate that in Sikhism, idolatry is not good. Remarkably, idolatry in the Guru Granth Sahib indicates the statue of God made of stone.[14] This allows us to understand that a stone idol is a typical mode of idolatry in India or particularly Hinduism. It seems to me that a painted image is somewhat secondary and likely a substitute for a sculpted image. Art historians do not pay much attention to the difference between a painted image and a sculpted image, but it is certainly crucial for anthropologists and religious scholars to prioritise a sculpted image for the purpose of idolatry. Therefore, it is beneficial to highlight the use of a painted image in Sikh's religious practice. As I discuss from now, narrative painting of the Janam-sakhis, the hagiography of Guru Nanak, was frequently produced in the pre-colonial period, and in the colonial period, portraits of Guru Nanak were circulated among Sikhs.

Iconography of Guru Nanak in narrative painting

Since representing Guru Nanak in painting does not violate Sikh doctrine, we look at how he was painted in each work. Before we discuss the portraiture of Guru Nanak, it is crucial to know how he was depicted in narrative painting. This is because early examples of Guru Nanak's representation are not portraiture but manuscript painting or set painting that narrates the Janam-sakhis, the hagiographic account of Guru Nanak.[15] The study of these Janam-sakhi paintings is more advanced than that of the portraiture of Guru Nanak, and previous studies tell us that the major series was executed from the end of the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century. This chapter highlights the evaluated ones due to the ample number of folios in existence: the B-40 set, the Guler set and the Unbound set. I attempt to explore how a three quarter face was applied to the images of Guru Nanak in these Janam-sakhi paintings.

Let us look at the B-40 set produced in 1733, the earliest series of the above-mentioned three sets. The B-40 set consists of fifty-seven folios. Since it has been housed in the British Library, one of the most modern institutions, its condition is very good, which enables art historians to prioritise other sets of Janam-sakhi paintings. The B-40 set has a complete colophon that indicates to us that the painter, Alam Chand, executed it for patron Bhai Sangu (Mcleod 1980, 90–91). I move on to the fortieth folio of the series that displays the typical setting and composition of the image of Guru Nanak (see Figure 1). This painting shows three figures from the left: a shepherd, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana (the famous Muslim attendant of Guru Nanak). In the Janam-sakhis, Mardana always holds a stringed instrument and travels over the country with Guru Nanak. In this painting, Guru Nanak is painted in a three-quarter face and wears a green cap, red headgear and yellow garment. He lets his left hand down to the land and his right hand holds a rosary. He sits with his right leg upright, on which his right hand is placed. A string is hung diagonally from his right shoulder. On the right back, a tree covers Guru Nanak as if it were a canopy and accommodates many birds in the branches. McLeod (1991) claims that the originality of Sikh art resides not in style and expression but in subject and content because the iconographic features of Guru Nanak, exemplified by a three-quarter face, correspond with those of Muslim Sufis (6–7).

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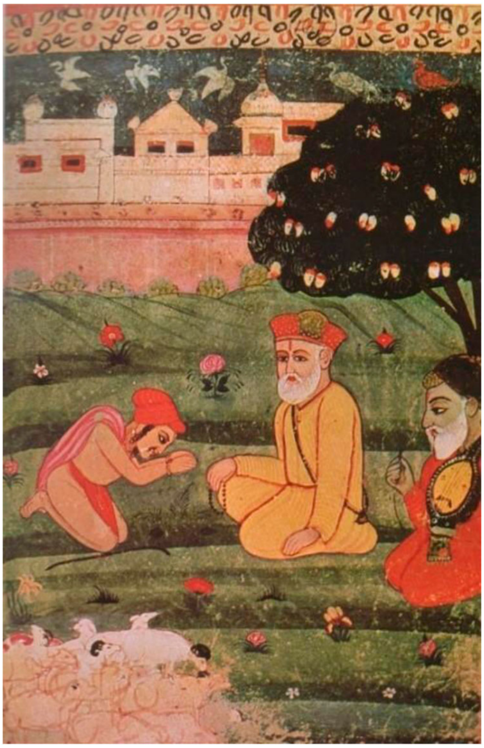

Figure 1. *Baba Nanak and Mardana with a Shepherd*. From the B-40 set of Janam-sakhi paintings. By Alam Chand. Punjab. 1733. Gouache on paper. India Office Library, the British Library. Acc. No. B-40

Next, I draw attention to the Guler set likely produced in the late eighteenth century since it also showcases the use of a three-quarter view for the images of Guru Nanak. This set is housed in the Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh, and my survey revealed that it consists of ten coloured folios and sixty-seven uncoloured drawings, although the drawings might be sketches since some coloured folios are based on the same compositions as those of the drawings. B. N. Goswamy, a foremost scholar on Pahari Painting, demonstrated that the Guler set was executed by the painters of the Seu-Nainsukh workshop. *King Paying Homage to Guru Nanak* (see Figure 2) shows the meeting between Raja Madhurbain and Guru Nanak in which the attendant Mardana and another famous attendant, Bala, participate. In this painting, Guru Nanak is represented by a three-quarter face as the folios of the B-40 set are and is wearing red headgear. He wears a pink garment and holds a manuscript in his left hand. Besides these features, a tree painted in the background and, more clearly, a three-quarter face in Guru Nanak's depictions, which evokes Muslim saints (*Sufi*), tell us that the image originates from the iconographic features of Guru Nanak in the B-40 set.

Next, let us examine the Unbound set likely produced at the end of the eighteenth century since a three-quarter view, which originates in the images of Muslim saints (*Sufi*), is used again for the images of Guru Nanak. The Unbound set consists of independent paintings that are not bound in the form of a manuscript. As a result, forty-one

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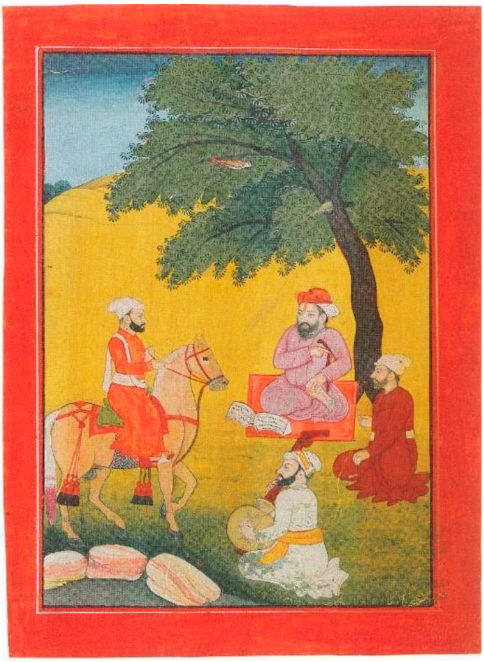

Figure 2. *A King Pays Homage to Guru Nanak*. From the Guler set of Janam-sakhi paintings. Attributed to the Seu-Nainsukh workshop. Pahari. Last quarter of the eighteenth century. 22.6 cm. × 16.5 cm. Opaque watercolour on paper. Acc. No. 4072(3), Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh

coloured paintings exist. This set is currently housed in the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, but was originally part of a private collection of Mr. and Mrs. Kapany, who were the founders of Sikh Foundation International. This series contains red-bordered and black-bordered folios. Goswamy (2006) insists that the former is the original and the latter is the works painted by a latter hand. Among the latter, *The Meeting of Disciples of Yogis with Guru Nanak* (see Figure 3) shows Guru Nanak in a three-quarter face as the B-40 and the Guler sets are, wearing a red headgear and holding a characteristic nimbus around his head. He wears a light green shawl over a light purple garment. A black string is hung around the neck. His right hand is painted as if it is offering something, which enables viewers to know that he is talking. This painting does not show a tree but the mountains behind his back, which are painted as if they cover him and may be a substitute for a tree.

I investigated a typical series of Janam-sakhi paintings. It is common among the three sets that Guru Nanak is painted in a three-quarter face that was basically an expression of Muslim saints (*Sufi*). This allows us to identify Guru Nanak from the figures in the compositions and, more importantly, it may reflect the desire of the viewers worshiping Guru Nanak's face. Many paintings from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century follow the tradition of Janam-sakhi painting. For example, *Guru Nanak with Bala and Mardana* (see Figure 4) shows Guru Nanak in the middle, in a three-quarter face, holding a nimbus and wearing yellow headgear and a garment underneath a brown shawl. On the sides, Bala and Mardana are depicted, and on the back, a tree serves the role of a

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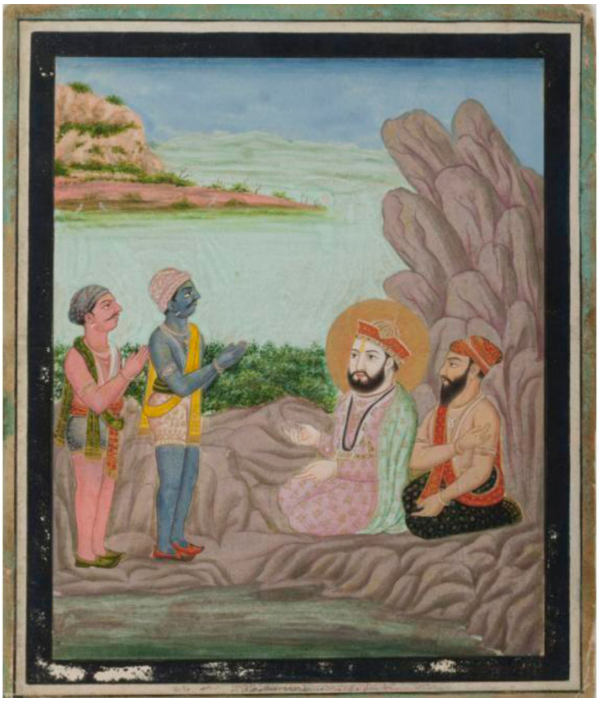

Figure 3. *Guru Nanak meets with Bal Nath Yogi's Disciples*. From the Unbound set of Janam-sakhi paintings. Artist unknown. Last quarter of the eighteenth century. Punjab. Acc. No. 1998.58.36, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco

canopy, which tells us that traditional images and compositions succeed in this work. The tradition in which Guru Nanak is painted in a three-quarter face was formed in narrative painting.

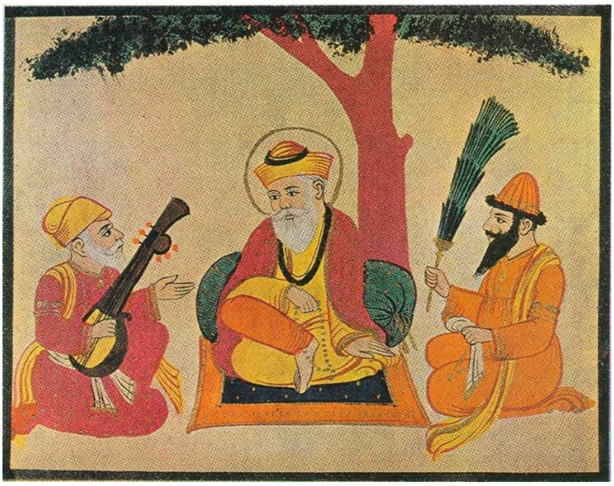

Figure 4. *Guru Nanak Dev with Bala and Mardana*. By artist Alam Chand. Punjab. Nineteenth century. Courtesy Dr. C. S. Chan, London (UK)

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Portraiture of Guru Nanak before the Colonial Period

Although Guru Nanak was painted with a three-quarter face in narrative painting, this is not always the case in portraiture (the subject of this research paper). Focusing on this aspect, this chapter looks at portraits of Guru Nanak produced before the colonial period. Generally speaking, perhaps *Guru Nanak with Bala and Mardana* (see Figure 4) is regarded as a portrait, but this paper defines the portrait as a painting in which Guru Nanak is independently depicted or infinitely close to this. Unlike narrative painting in which Guru Nanak was depicted as a Muslim, namely in a three-quarter face, Guru Nanak was painted in portraiture as a Muslim saint in a three-quarter face and as a Hindu ascetic in a full face.

To begin with, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh painters frequently portrayed Guru Nanak in a three-quarter face, namely as a Muslim saint. In Figure 5, which showcases typical late Mughal style, Guru Nanak is sitting on a terrace with a lake in the background. Guru Nanak is wearing a skullcap typical of Muslims and is holding a red book in his left hand. The shawl and garment are likely made with the same type of clothes, and Guru

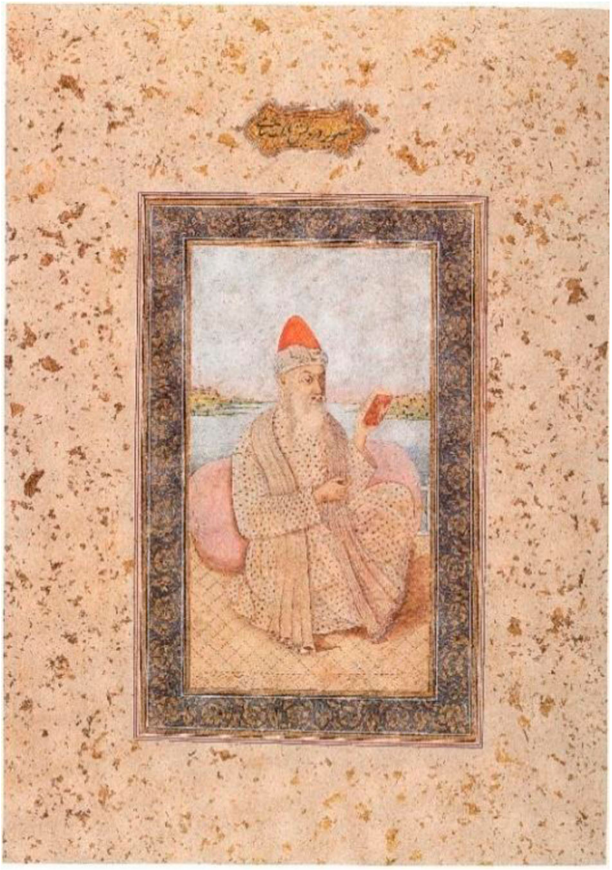

Figure 5. *Guru Nanak Reading from a Text*. Folio, possibly from a series of portraits of religious men. Late Mughal. Last quarter of the eighteenth century. Opaque watercolour on paper. 16.7 cm. × 15.5 cm. Collection of Satinder and Narinder Kapany

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Nanak is leaning against a pink cushion. While it seems to me that Figure 5 was produced around Lahore in the Punjab region, Figure 6 was most likely executed in the Deccan plateau in South India in the middle of the eighteenth century. This region included Islamic kingdoms different from the Mughal Empire, which originated in West Asia and produced a style of painting known as Deccani.[16] In this painting, Guru Nanak is depicted much more largely than his attendants and is holding a nimbus where the edges are painted gold and the centre is painted light green. He is wearing a skullcap illuminated in three colours and is sitting on a red cushion, wearing a pink garment from the upper to the lower body. Next, I highlight *Guru Nanak with Ganesh and Soldiers* (see Figure 7), which I discovered during my 2010 fieldwork. This drawing showcases Guru Nanak in a three-quarter face, namely as a Muslim, with Ganesh within an oval frame at the centre. Six attendants in the decoration of arab-esque motifs surround him. The oval frame around Guru Nanak holds the pedestal of animal motifs underneath. This painting is not regarded as portraiture according to the definition of this paper, but it is important that it showcases the process of Guru Nanak being portrayed independently. Since this kind of composition does not exist in traditional miniatures, it reflects a strong Western influence. It is assumed that this painting was produced in an Imam Baksh workshop in which painters executed works for European patrons during the Sikh Kingdom. Finally, I argue that a three-quarter face originally indicated a Muslim figure, while it was gradually adapted as an unique expression of a Sikh religiously/profanely authorised figure, like Guru Nanak.

In contrast, other painters of precolonial Punjab portrayed Guru Nanak in the frontal format. In Figure 8, Guru Nanak sits cross-legged on a pink carpet with a

Figure 6. *Guru Nanak, the First Guru of the Sikhs.* Hyderabad, Deccan. Ca. 1730–40. Paper. 35.5 cm. × 24.5 cm. Acc. No. 59.314, National Museum, New Delhi

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Figure 7. *Guru Nanak with Ganesh and Soldiers*. Lahore. Second quarter of the nineteenth century. Possibly from the workshop of Imam Bakhsh Lahori. Fakir Khana Museum, Lahore

green background, like a plane. He is wearing a pink cap like the carpet and is likely wearing nothing under the white shawl. He is also wearing orange trousers and is holding a manuscript in his right hand. His white beard implies that he is quite old. In Figure 9, Guru Nanak is rendered in the same attitude as in Figure 8, likely in a green hermitage. The background is painted blue like a sky, and a black stream is shown at the bottom of the composition. A transparent white shawl is used again here, but his trousers are white. Judging from formal and stylistic analysis, it is only painters of the Mankot Kingdom in the Pahari hills who portray Guru Nanak as a Hindu ascetic.[17] While previous works represent Guru Nanak as an ascetic or a saint of other religions, Figure 10 is unique in portraying him as a Sikh guru. This is best shown by a turban worn by Guru Nanak, and no other works have this depiction. In this painting, Guru Nanak holds a golden nimbus on his head, wearing a navy-blue shawl over the same yellow garment as a turban. A tree trunk is painted at the right border and its branch covers Guru Nanak's head as if a canopy. A lake is depicted in the background, and mountains appear beyond it. The image of this painting is a bit particular in comparison with other contemporary works, for Guru Nanak is rendered neither as a Hindu ascetic nor as an Islamic saint, although the adoption of a full face is common with the depiction of a Hindu ascetic.

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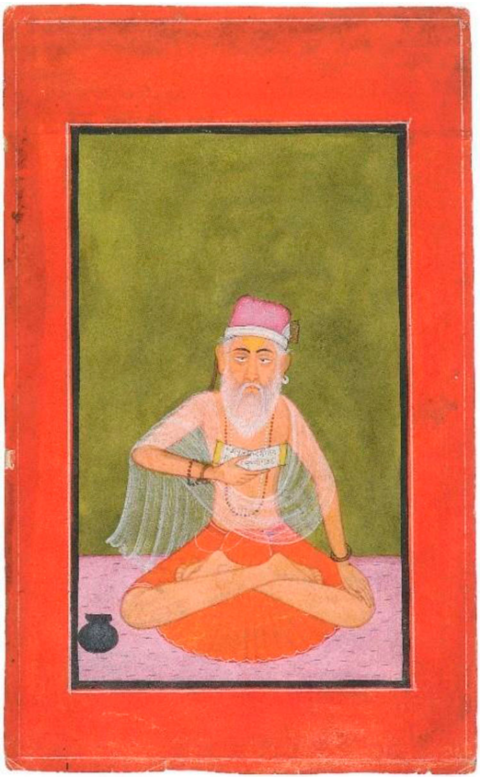

Figure 8. *Guru Nanak Seated in Meditation*. Opaque watercolour on paper. Pahari, possibly from a Mankot workshop. The second quarter of the eighteenth century. 18 cm. × 11.2 cm. Acc. No. 248. Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh

Considering the above analysis and examination, we can see the trial and error of artists around the depiction of Guru Nanak in portraiture produced before the colonial period. I will argue that since Sikhism was a young religion founded at the end of the fifteenth century, it did not have the original tradition of painting that Hinduism and Islam have. Although Guru Nanak is considered one of the saints (*Sants*) active in medieval North India (McLeod 1968), it is intriguing that the formal features of Guru Nanak's image is partly derived from those of Islamic saints (*Sufis*).

Local Communities Against Colonial Rule

Although I have looked at how Guru Nanak was painted before the colonial period, from this point forward, I examine the colonial circumstances to which I aspire to draw attention. Before clarifying what kind of image Guru Nanak was painted within colonial portraiture, I first outline the colonial impacts on the Punjab region. The Punjab region was annexed by the British East India Company in 1849, but Western thoughts were brought about by the propagation activities of Christian missionaries before this phenomenon. The diffusion of Christianity in the Punjab region was evident in the Punjab Missionary Conference held in 1862 and the Anjuman-i-Punjab, established in 1865 (Oberoi 1994, 219, 231). The English name of the latter is the Society for the Diffusion of Useful

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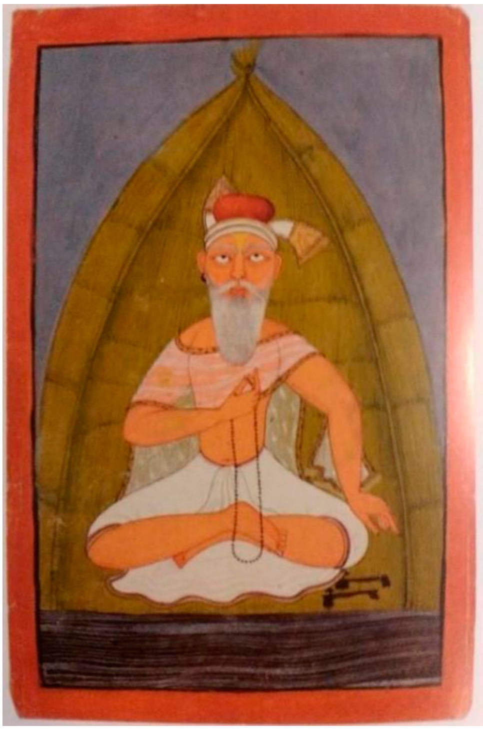

Figure 9. *Guru Nanak Seated in Meditation*. Pahari, possibly from a Mankot workshop. The second quarter of the eighteenth century. In Diamond, 2013

Figure 10. *Guru Nanak*. By Artist Jodh Singh. 1848. Shreesh pigment on canvas. Sonia Dhami's Collection

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Knowledge, which was established by Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner (1840–1899), the principal of Government College Lahore. Until 1877, the Anjuman-i-Punjab acquired 300 members, who included many potential Sikh leaders (Perril 1976, 519–23, in Oberoi 1994, 231).

The Punjab region was formally absorbed into the British Indian Empire a year after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Therefore, the census and city planning were conducted by the British, and Western education and science/technology were introduced to the Punjab region. Along with them, new values such as democracy, individualism and capitalism were brought. British colonial rule generated a newly formed urban middle class, who did not exist previously and were employed as civil servants, doctors, lawyers, journalists and technicians (Sohal 2008, 255–262). In the census of 1891, 7 percent of the twenty-three million residents in Punjab Province were registered as English speakers, and almost all were considered a newly formed urban middle class (Oberoi 1994, 262). The increase in the urban middle class was parallel to the dissemination of higher education institutions, which were monopolised by the middle class due to high tuition fees. These universities offered a curriculum that instilled traditional thoughts and history in the local language and an English class on Christianity and Western scholarship (Oberoi 1994, 281–4). Consequently, local intellectuals who engaged in the redefinition of traditional thoughts and nationalism emerged across ethnicities and religions.

I will briefly introduce the responses of the Sikhs against modernisation in these circumstances. First, Dyal Singh Majithia (1848–98), who studied in a Christian missionary school, is listed as a person who supported modernisation. He insisted that local thoughts should be replaced by Western thoughts. In contrast, Baba Ram Singh (1816–85), the leader of the Namdhari School[18], is known to have rejected Western life (Mann 2004, 58–59).

Turning to the late nineteenth century, the socio-religious reform movement known as the Singh Sabha Movement was carried out by Sikh intellectuals. The Singh Sabhas were registered across the Punjab region and aimed to redefine the Sikh tradition opposing indigenous Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, which were rapidly acquiring followers (Oberoi 1994, 236). The first Singh Sabha was established in Amritsar in 1973, while the second Singh Sabha was established in Lahore in 1879. At its peak, the Singh Sabhas were organised in Malaysia and Hong Kong, and its number reached 115 (Ballantyne 2006, 71–73; Oberoi 1994, 295). The primary topics of the Singh Sabhas were whether Sikh authority lay in the sacred text or the powerful individual and whether Sikhism was a branch of Hinduism (Grewal 1990, 144–150; Singh 2005, 136–147; Sohal 2008, 159–171).

Following the Singh Sabha Movement, the early 1920s was the time of the Akali Movement, which was about the management of Sikh temples. This originated in an attempt to apply the concept of private property (introduced by British colonial rule) to Sikh temples. Pagans known as Udashi claimed the right to manage Sikh temples (Mann 2004, 64). The Akali Movement resulted in 4,000 casualties and 2,000 injured people, as well as 30,000 arrestees. Eventually, the Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925 prescribed that the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) begin to manage these temples as representatives of the Sikh community (Mann 2004, 64; Singh 2005, 193–215). Illustrated by the Singh Sabha Movement and the Akali Movement, the half-century from the 1870s to the 1920s was when Sikhism underwent religiously and societally significant changes.

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Now that this chapter is closing, I would like to suggest, from the viewpoint of the social circumstances of colonial Punjab, two reasons portraits of Guru Nanak began to be hung on walls. First, Christian icons might have been brought into the Punjab region in the late nineteenth century.[19] Christian missionaries of that time propagated their beliefs under the auspice of colonial bureaucracy, and the Bible was disseminated among the Punjabis [Grewal 1990, 140–144; Singh 2005, 121–135]. I insist that the icons were used for propagation, apart from the Bible. The Sikhs might hang portraits of venerated Guru Nanak on the wall, following Christian icons that the devotees worshiped. It is just that it was not a mere imitation, but the Sikhs likely intended to oppose Christians by hanging portraits of Guru Nanak on walls.

Second, disputes about idolatry in Sikhism might affect the behaviour of hanging a portrait of Guru Nanak. The Amritsar Singh Sabha, which played a pivotal role in the Singh Sabha Movement, along with the Lahore Singh Sabha, claimed that the icons and idols of ten Gurus were the manifestations of inclusive religious practice and the medium for worship (Fenech and McLeod 2014, 151, 273). It is pointed out that for the members of the Amritsar Singh Sabha, Hindu sacred texts and the practice of idolatry were mentally sympathised (Ballantyne 2006, 15–16, 36). As such, the atmosphere in which idolatry was tolerated despite the Sikh doctrines existed among the Sikhs. This likely allowed the Sikhs to approve of the act of hanging portraits of Guru Nanak on walls. However, remarkably, this differed from the idolatry performed by Hindus. In Hinduism, *darshan*, the act of exchanging gazes between devotees and divine statues, is regarded as important. In contrast, it seems that such behaviour does not exist between portraits of Guru Nanak and the Sikhs. This is because Guru Nanak is not a god but, I dare to say, merely a prophet meditating between God and devotees, which generated the distinction between Hindu idols and portraits of the Sikh Guru.

Colonial Portraiture of Guru Nanak

I have demonstrated that representing Guru Nanak in painting is not prohibited in the Sikh doctrine and that narrative painting and portraiture showcase different formal features before the colonial period. So how did precolonial tradition change through the experience of British colonial rule? Can we discover new significance of the transformation?

As we keep these questions in mind, this chapter looks at portraits of Guru Nanak produced in colonial Punjab. In this torso-depiction (see Figure 11), Guru Nanak is treated as a profane figure, depicted in his gorgeous ornaments such as a crown and a colourful shawl, which Goswamy (2000, 36) claims was a costume of a Muslim king.[20] This work is part of a set of paintings that portrays Sikh notability. Another important aspect of this work is that it clarifies the establishment of the genre of a single portrait of Guru Nanak. Since such an ivory painting is small, the freedom of the artist's composition is likely restricted. It is assumed that the number of these single portraits increased during the colonial period from the late nineteenth century. Remarkably, a small portrait allowed the owner to carry it, wear it as a pendant or send it as a gift. Considering the realistic depiction of Guru Nanak and the medium of ivory, I maintain that a patron of this painting was the British who ruled Punjab after 1849. Likewise, judging from iconographic features, such as Guru Nanak's face and personal ornaments, which derive from the

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tradition of the early nineteenth century, an artist who depicted this work likely belonged to a local workshop.

Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe (see Figure 12) is perhaps the most renowned portrait of Guru Nanak and is often inserted into catalogues. At first glance, this portrait is influenced by European painting while being applied to traditional patterns. This is obvious in the shapes of the vegetation behind the terrace, which is painted with gradation without an outline. Realistic and refrained coloring is used in the halo around his head. Guru Nanak, with one knee on the floor, sits on a cushion. A rosary is in his right hand, and his left hand is dropped to the carpet; this is derived from the iconography of narrative painting in the early nineteenth century. His colourful shawl had appeared in the prior-mentioned ivory portrait, whereas Guru Nanak wears a crown-like cap rather than a crown. It is most noticeable that the verses of the Quran are written on Guru Nanak's cloak, which implies that this portrait could have been painted by a Muslim artist (see Figure 13). Also, its highly sophisticated style suggests the possibility that the workshop was a group of first-class painters serving Sikh royalty and nobility in the early nineteenth century.

So who was the patron who commissioned *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe,* while a Muslim painter executed the portrait? As I pointed out, this portrait is the work of an excellent painter who controlled and mixed traditional and Western styles. It is assumed that such artwork was expensive. At the bottom of the painting, the inscription is written in Gurumukhi script used for the Punjabi language: *Guru Nanak Patshahi Pehli … Maharaj … Sahib* (translated as 'Guru Nanak, the first king … maharaja … saint') (see Figure 14). Such an inscription in the local language clarifies that this portrait

Figure 11. *Guru Nanak. Artist unknown*. Lahore. Ca. 1850–Ca. 1870. Painted on ivory. Diameter: 5.1 cm. Acc. No. IS.150–1954, Victoria and Albert Museum

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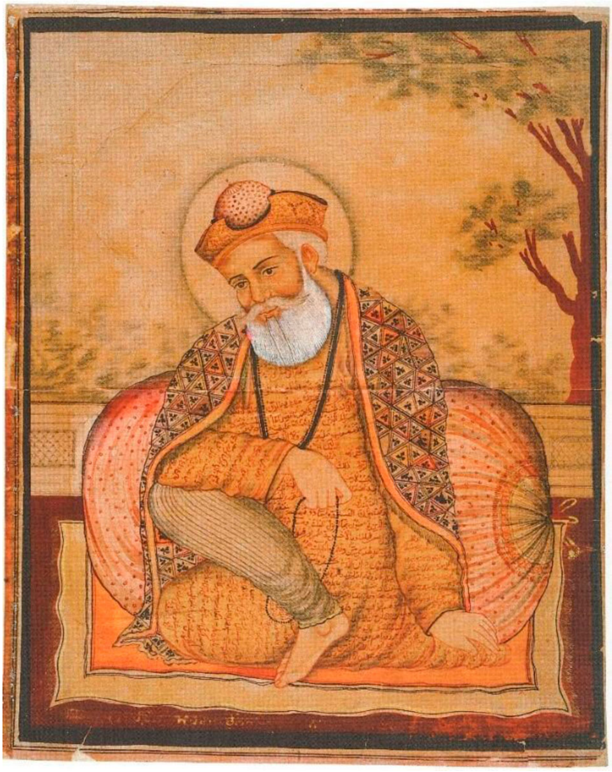

Figure 12. *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe.* Lahore. Late nineteenth century. 36 × 28.6 cm. The Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh. Acc. No. 2401

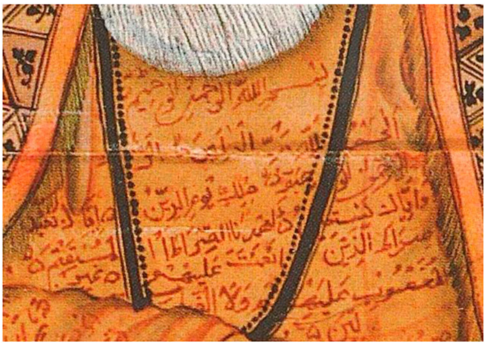

Figure 13. *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe (Detail).* Lahore, late nineteenth century. The Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh. Acc. No. 2401

was not commissioned by a British patron. Considering that Sikh royalty and nobility collapsed in the late nineteenth century, I argue that the patron of this painting was a member of the newly formed urban middle class. The urban middle class possessed ample funding due to the benefits of a capitalist-dominated economy. Since its members received a Western education, they were likely to welcome things from

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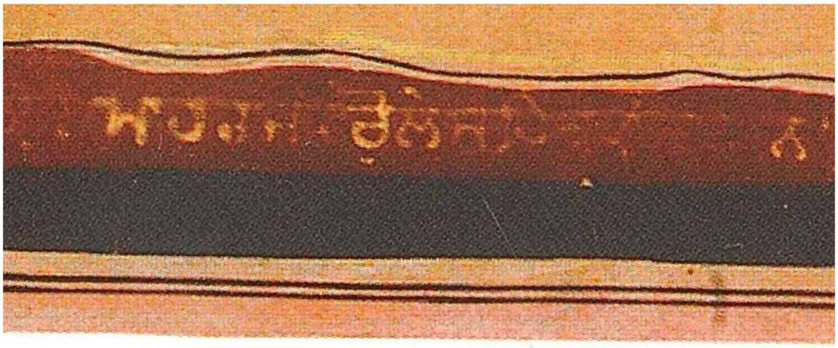

Figure 14. *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe (Detail)*. Lahore, late nineteenth century. The Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh. Acc. No. 2401

foreign countries. Perhaps they purchased such a painting influenced by the West. The urban middle class of that time, who regarded Western culture as advanced, were able to manifest their social status, such as an innovative spirit and wealth, by owning the cultural capital of Westernised portraits. Remarkably, this painting was executed in a double size of traditional miniatures, which were derived from the manuscript paintings of Jainism and Buddhism and were most likely appreciated by individuals. In contrast, *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe* was likely appreciated in a group and may have been hung on a wall.

Turning to the twentieth century, the portraiture of Guru Nanak was constantly produced, but the number of artworks in existence is limited.[21] It is possible to classify them into two groups: the three-quarter face and the frontal. To begin, we look at a group of three-quarter-face portraitures, which is a feature of images depicting Guru Nanak in narrative painting. Figure 15 was painted in the early twentieth century by Ustad Hari Sharif, who was born in Patiala in 1889. This painting showcases a depth typical of late Mughal painting in which Guru Nanak's head is encircled by a white halo. He is wearing a colourful shawl, as a portrait painted in the late nineteenth century, but Guru Nanak is wearing a turban characteristic of the Sikhs. The same cloth is possibly used for his robe. However, it differs from the late nineteenth-century portrait in that no inscription written on the robe appeared in the early twentieth-century portrait. His attitude towards sitting with one knee down seems derived from the traditional image in narrative painting. Figure 16 was painted in the 1930s by Pannalal Gopilal, who worked in Nathdwara. In this painting, Guru Nanak is sitting under a big tree, and the distant view displays a castle. His head is encircled by a golden halo, and his headgear is like that in *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe* (see Figure 12). His shawl becomes simpler, but his image of tilting the head looks like the image of *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe* (Figure 12). Figure 17 is a portrait painted in Patiala in 1849 by Shan Pratap Salwans. Intriguingly, the verses in Gurumukhi script are written on Guru Nanak's attire, which reminds us of *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe* (see Figure 12) with Arabic inscriptions. Guru Nanak's pose and an object like a cushion follow traditional iconography.[22]

Next, we look at a group of frontals. In this group, Guru Nanak sits on the grass rather than on a terrace. In Figure 18, Guru Nanak's head is encircled by a white halo, and he is

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Figure 15. *Guru Nanak*. By Ustad Haji Sharif. Punjab. First quarter of the twentieth century. Acc. No. 1469, Lahore Museum

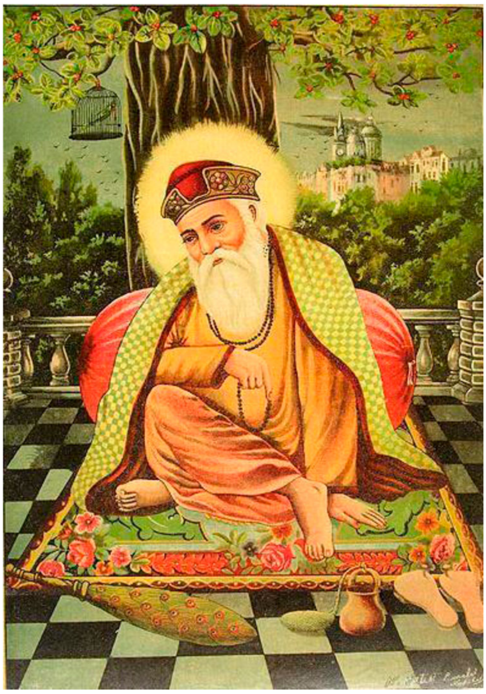

Figure 16. *Guru Nanak Dev*. By N.[athdwara] artist. Pannalal Gopilal. Ca. 1930s. Chromolithograph. 50.7 cm. × 35.8 cm. Acc. No. CP-9, Collection of Robert J. Del Bonta

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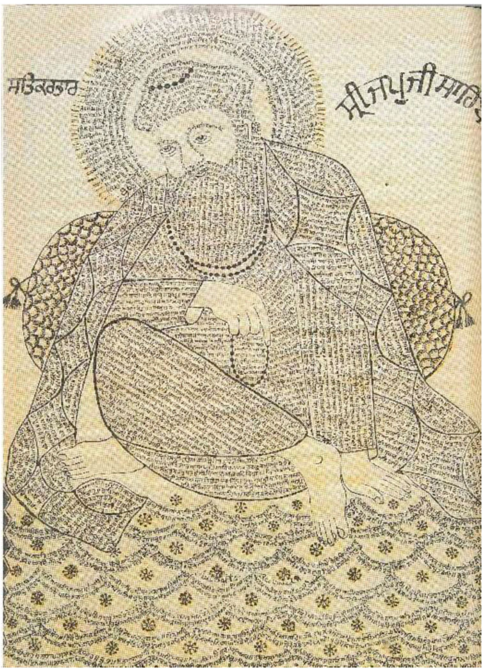

Figure 17. *Guru Nanak*. By Shan Pratap Salwans. Patiala. 1947. See Singh (2004, 62)

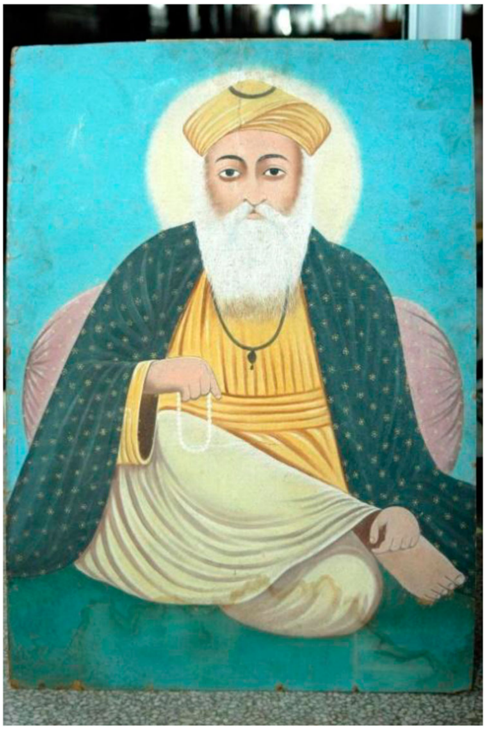

Figure 18. *Guru Nanak Cross-Legged*. Artist unknown. Punjab. First quarter of the twentieth century. Watercolour on cardboard. Acc. No. 1545, Lahore Museum

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wearing the turban, characteristic of the Sikhs. The shawl is coloured strong green with polka dots. His robe is likely woven by the same cloth as the turban, but his trousers are woven with white cloth. His crossed-leg pose and leaning cushion originate from traditional images of narrative painting. Figure 19 showcases a genuine expression characteristic of European painting, which implies that the painter, Arjun Singh, was formally educated in art school. The waterside is winding from the front to the back to represent depth. Behind the waterside, mountains are rendered technically, and on the right-hand side, the trees are depicted using an occlusive perspective. The halo around Guru Nanak's head is transparent and more realistic, and the turban looks like that of a Sikh. His robe is made of the same yellow cloth, but his shawl is made of brown cloth.

As I have discussed, the portraiture of Guru Nanak was constantly produced during the colonial period, but there was a huge difference in patronage in the commissioning of portraiture. Following the collapse of the royalty and nobility in the Sikh Kingdom, the emerging urban middle class became a new patron of art. Also, while *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe* (see Figure 12) is the most important work of art in this period, the reason is that three-quarter-face narrative painting was applied to a form of portraiture. In addition to the three-quarter view typical of narrative painting, the colonial portraiture of Guru Nanak applies a form of the frontal view. This is partly because the Hindu-like image in precolonial portraiture remains and partly because these portraits were influenced by European portraiture, which applies different facial patterns.

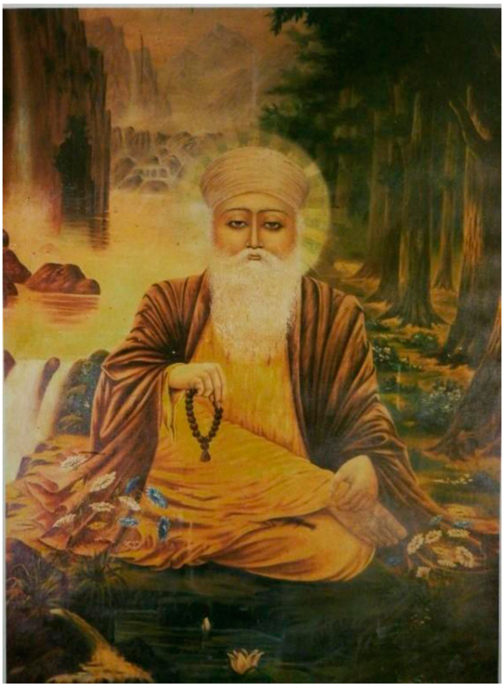

Figure 19. *Guru Nanak Cross-Legged*. By Arjun Singh. Punjab. 1935. Oil on canvas. Baba Baghel Singh Museum, Bangla Sahib Gurudwara, New Delhi

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The Social Role of Guru Nanak Portraiture

Now we return to the topic of wall-hung portraits. I have pointed out that the portraiture of Guru Nanak, namely *Guru Nanak Dressed in an Inscribed Robe* (see Figure 12), was painted for the newly formed urban middle class, judging from its elegantly Westernised style and inscriptions in the local language. In the following stage, it is assumed that the portraiture of Guru Nanak was disseminated among ordinary Sikhs. This stage was likely characterised by mass-produced prints rather than independent artworks, which were brought out by printing technology introduced in Lahore in the mid-nineteenth century. *Guru Nanak* (see Figure 16) is considered the earliest mass-produced portrait in existence. While the path to ordinary Sikhs is unknown, I claim that portraitures of Guru Nanak were initially installed in Sikh temples. This is because the portraiture of the Sikh Gurus was forbidden to be hung in Sikh temples in the 1930s[23] (Cole and Sambhi 1978, 45). It is inferred that the portraiture of Guru Nanak was brought into ordinary Sikhs' homes in the 1920s when the Akali Movement flourished.

Then how significant in Sikh society is the diffusion of portraiture of Guru Nanak, which started to be hung on walls in the colonial period? Remarkably, there is a dispute in contemporary academia over Sikh identity. Some scholars regard the union of Khalsa in 1699 as a milestone in the transformation of Sikh identity, while others claim that colonialism in the late nineteenth century was the most influential. Among the latter group, the study of Oberoi was the most renowned[24] (Oberoi 1994). According to Oberoi, the boundaries of religious communities, such as those of Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs, were far more blurred in late nineteenth-century Punjab than in contemporary South Asia. Oberoi argued that the British administration demarcated the Sikhs from Hindus via the Singh Sabha Movement in the late nineteenth century.

However, Oberoi's view that an inner conflict between the Singh Sabhas formed the modern Sikh identity was recently criticised. For example, Pashaura Singh condemned the dichotomised view that the Amritsar Singh Sabha was Hindu-like, while the Lahore Singh Sabha sought the Sikh autonomy[25] (Singh 2012, 29; Singh 2014, 29). The Singh Sabha in Basaur was more fundamentalistic than the Lahore Singh Sabha. The Basaur Singh Sabha deleted the hymns made by the pagans and claimed that the devotees who did not finish formal baptism should be exiled from the Sikh community (Mann 2004, 63). Pashaura Singh concluded that the reason the Lahore Singh Sabha was dominant in thought in the twentieth century was that they were centrists in three Sabhas (Singh 2012, 29; Singh 2014, 29). Likewise, Mandair (2014) maintained that the reason the Lahore Singh Sabha came to be predominant in thought was because of the external factors of colonialism rather than the inner conflict between the Singh Sabhas (76).

Given the above, Oberoi's study has been criticised. However, I favour his argument that the Sikhs acquired a distinct identity that differed from Hindus during the colonial period. This is because the portraiture of Guru Nanak began to be hung on walls during Sikh revivalism from the 1870s to the 1920s. Like Sikhism, Hindu traditions and thoughts were reformed during the colonial period. While there was a view that idolatry is indeed the Hindu identity (Ramos 2015), these idols most likely indicate the statue of gods and goddesses made of stone and metal.[26] In contrast, the Sikhs came to venerate wall-hung portraiture, namely pictorial representation.[27] In short, the art form created boundaries between them. Meanwhile, the portraiture of Guru Nanak differs from an Islamic custom

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in that the face of the prophet is not painted due to the denial of idolatry. In other words, the Sikhs demarcated themselves from Hindus and Muslims by gaining wall-hung portraiture of Guru Nanak[28] and believed that they were neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but a devotee of the new religion that reformed two sects. This means that Sikhism withdrew from its traditional doctrine that prohibits idolatry and evolved into the religion's modern form.[29]

However, this does not mean that the Singh Sabha Movement eliminated Hindu thoughts from the Sikh community. This is because the portraiture of Guru Nanak has constantly been painted both in Sikhism's distinct three-quarter face and in Hinduism's idolatrous frontal. This was underpinned by the fact that Tat Khalsa, aiming for autonomous Sikhism, was becoming dominant in the Singh Sabha Movement, whereas Hindunised Sanatan Sikhs still existed. Under these circumstances, depicting Guru Nanak in different images in portraiture likely contributed to maintaining Sikhs' cohesion in that the Sikhs, who had different thoughts and beliefs, venerated a common entity of Guru Nanak. In other words, Guru Nanak came to be expected to play a more religious and social role in Sikh society than ever before, which I claim is the reason portraiture of Guru Nanak has been venerated beyond the Sikh doctrine that prohibits idolatry.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the portraiture of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and examined the colonial transformation of his images and the social role that was resultantly played.

The Sikh holy text says that idolatry is criticised as being stupid and useless behaviour, yet it chiefly indicates a statue of gods made of stone and does not mention pictorial representations, such as narrative painting and portraiture. It was important in the pre-colonial period that Guru Nanak be painted in a three-quarter face in the paintings of the Janam-sakhis. While Hindu goddesses, ascetics and Islamic saints were also sometimes painted in a three-quarter face, a three-quarter face is exclusively used for the formal expression of Guru Nanak, as far as I have investigated. This tradition was not strictly applied in portraiture painted before the colonial period, and Guru Nanak was also painted in frontal format, which evokes the statue of Hindu gods.

In contrast, after the Punjab region was annexed to the British East India Company in 1849, a middle class that received a Western education emerged. They started the Singh Sabha Movement, which discussed Sikh orthodoxy from the 1870s in opposition to expanding Christianity. Along with the British, the newly formed middle class became a primary patron of the arts after royal and noble patronage collapsed. As a result, single portraits of Guru Nanak were executed for the Sikh urban middle class, some of which likely hung on walls. In portraiture painted during the colonial period, portraying Guru Nanak in a three-quarter face in mass-produced chromolithographs was crucial, and the origin of the images is obviously the paintings of the Janam-sakhis. However, another tradition of the frontal in Guru Nanak portraiture was succeeded from the pre-colonial period, and some frontal works produced in the early twentieth century were likely influenced by European portraiture. Figure 18, painted in frontal format, looks like a darshanised image of Hinduism in which the sitter opens his eyes.

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Figure 12 is a depiction of Guru Nanak wearing a robe inscribed with text from the Quran. These facts suggest the possibility that there were various and complicated attitudes of devotion opposing the intention of Singh Sabha's leaders, who attempted to demarcate Sikhism from other religions regarding the avoidance and denial of beliefs. Guru Nanak portraiture is a cultural device that symbolises the uniqueness of Sikhism and simultaneously includes different positions and views. It is fair to say that Guru Nanak portraiture is an indispensable viewpoint in the study of modern and contemporary Sikhism.

Notes

1. This paper was originally published in Japanese in *South Asian Studies*, the journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies (2021, Vol. 32, pp. 35–73).
2. The term *guru* generally indicates a religious leader in South Asian languages, but Sikhism calls as guru only ten human leaders and the sacred text known as the Guru Granth Sahib. Gurus in Sikhism differ from gurus in Hinduism in that they were not only religious leaders but also political leaders. In this paper, the author used a capital G for the Sikh Gurus.
3. The number of Sikhs is approximately 30 million in 2022, and 76 percent of them live in the Punjab State of the Republic of India. The proportion of the Sikhs in the Indian national population is roughly 2 percent every year. The term *Sikh* in Punjabi language basically denotes a disciple.
4. The most famous portrait of Guru Nanak in contemporary Sikh society is *Guru Nanak in an Ashirwad Pose*, which was painted for Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in 1969 by Sobha Singh (1901–1986). Sobha Singh painted a portrait of Guru Nanak for the first time in 1924 (Kessar 2003, 122), which was inserted into a magazine named *Phulwari* (Kaur 1990, pl. 3). A similar composition of Photo 1 appears in Cole and Sambhi (1978). This seems to be the earliest evidence of the wall-hung portrait of Guru Nanak.
5. Apart from Guru Nanak, other nine Gurus are portrayed in contemporary Sikh society. However, Guru Nanak was the most popular subject among the Sikhs when I conducted fieldwork in India in 2010 and 2016. In Sikhism, only Guru Nanak received revelation, and other Gurus used his signature in writing a verse. This means that Guru Nanak was not only the first Guru among ten Gurus but also shaped the fundamental thought of Sikhism.
6. The term Punjab is a combination of *punj*(five)+*ab*(river). When the author uses the term Punjab, the range is from the Punjab Province in Pakistan to part of the Haryana State and the Himachal Pradesh State in India. This region is equivalent to the territories of the Punjab Province in British India.
7. Jean-Marie Lafont designated a new style in this period as the Lahore School (Lafont 2002; Lafont and Schmitz 2002).
8. The Mayo School of Art still exists as the name of the National College of Arts, Pakistan.
9. Specifically, the newly formed urban middle class constituted civil servants, doctors, lawyers, journalists and engineers (Sohal 2008, 255–262).
10. I would argue that one definition of Sikh art is that it is an *art of Sikhs*, in which the word *Sikh* can indicate patron, audience and artist in general. Another definition of Sikh art is *art of Sikhism*, in which the subject of the artwork is something related to Sikhism. Since *Sikh* art always has a religious connotation in comparison with Mughal and Rajput painting, which are designated depending on patron of art, this paper takes the latter view of Sikh art, based on subject rather than artist and patron.
11. We know about two previous studies on portraiture of Guru Nanak. One is an essay written by B. N. Goswamy in an exhibition catalog in which he points out that the number of Guru Nanak portraitures in existence is small due to the prohibition of idolatry in the Sikh

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doctrine (Goswamy 2000, 31–41). The other is an article written by Nirvikar Singh in which he examines the production years of the portraits (Singh 2017). Please refer to Randhawa (1971).

12. Like the author of this article, Crispin Branfoot also pointed out that wall-hung portraits were introduced to the subcontinent in the colonial period (Branfoot 2018, 23).
13. These chapters are partly based on Ikeda (2019a) and Ikeda (2019b).
14. The Dasam Granth, known in Sikhism as the second holy text, is generally believed for Guru Gobind Singh to edit, in which the descriptions on idolatry presumes a statue made of stone (Singh 2003).
15. The Janam-sakhis narrates the miracles that Guru Nanak performed in his journey inside and outside the subcontinent. It is said that he met many mystical characters such as the saints of other faiths, speaking animals and fishes and supernatural demons.
16. Deccani painting is characterized as decorative. It tends to use cold colors and the figure is highly stylised compared to Mughal painting and Rajput painting.
17. The Mankot style tends to favor a flat and monocoloured background in which original colors such as yellow, green and red are used. It showcases a typical expression of Rajput or Pahari painting.
18. The Namdhari School is known as Kuka Sikhs and was founded by Baba Ram Singh (1797–1862). They accuse the Sikhs who conduct cremations like Hindus. Also, they think highly of the identity of Khalsa, which Gobind Singh united (Singh 2005, 121–135).
19. Christian imagery had arrived in North India for the first time in the seventeenth century. It seems to me that the use of Christian imagery expanded significantly in the colonial period.
20. While this painting was applied to a textbook in contemporary California, USA, the local Sikh community was strongly against it (McKinley 2007).
21. W. H. McLeod, known as one of the pioneers in Sikh studies, mentions in his Popular Sikh Art that there are only few portraits of the Sikh Gurus in existence due to the fact that the leaders of the Singh Sabha were alleged to prohibit idolatry (Mcleod 1991, 28). However, considering the fact that some portraits of Guru Nanak were reproduced in this paper, it is assumed that their influence was limited, and people demanded Guru Nanak portraiture in everyday life.
22. As a portrait of Guru Nanak painted in a three-quarter face in the early twentieth, *Nam Khumari Nanaka Chari Rehe Din Raat* is renowned (Kaur 1990, pl. 66).
23. In contemporary Sikh temples, portraiture of Guru Nanak is sometimes installed in the hall of worship; however, in most temples, it is installed in less religious space, such as in an equipped museum or langar halls. Portraiture of Guru Nanak tends to be installed in the temples built in a diaspora community rather than Amritsar where SGPC carefully monitors. The museum equipped in Sikh temples is extensively examined in Murphy (2012, 2015).
24. Oberoi’s study was criticized by scholars who highlight the union of Khalsa by Gobind Singh in 1699 (Mann, Sodhi, and Gill 1995).
25. Oberoi designates the group of Amritsar Singh Sabha as Sanatan Sikhs, while he named the group of Lahore Singh Sabha as Tat Khalsa (Oberoi 1994).
26. In worship towards Krishna in Nathdwara, the painted image of the god is being used instead of his sculpted image (Pinney 2004).
27. I am using the term ‘venerate’ rather than ‘worship’ because Guru Nanak is most likely a prophet who mediates the god and devotees.
28. Apart from South Asian painting, Persian painting has a long tradition of portraiture of Muhammad (Gruber 2009).
29. Ramaswamy (2003, xv) mentions, “a society becomes truly modern when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images of the nation”. This claim liaises with the author’s view that portraits of Guru Nanak came to be hung on walls by the urban middle class and disseminated among people, which resulted in the opening of modern Sikhism.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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